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SUBJECT: PM THACI'S FIRST OFFICIAL VISIT TO ALBANIA

11. (U) SUMMARY: Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci paid a two-day official visit to Albania June 19 and 20, accompanied by a 27-member delegation. It was the first visit of a Kosovar leader since the country declared independence on February 17. Thaci met with top political leaders including President Bamir Topi and Parliament Speaker Josefina Topalli, and traveled to Vlore to accept an honorary citizenship. The two governments signed a general Memorandum of Understanding to affirm their mutual commitment to stability and cooperation in the region. Prime Minister Thaci was awarded one of Albania's highest honors, the Skanderbeg medal, by President Topi, reaffirming the special relationship between the two countries. End Summary.

A ROUND OF OFFICIAL MEETINGS

12. (U) Prime Minister Berisha received his Kosovar counterpart with full state honors, with the Kosovo's flag flying throughout the capital and its new national anthem played for the first time in Tirana. Their initial fact-to-face encounter was followed by an expanded meeting and press conference. The two leaders signed a MoU to define future cooperation on issues including energy, the fight against organized crime and corruption, and ongoing efforts to secure international recognition for Kosovo. Berisha reaffirmed his government's intent to be a shareholder in a planned thermal power plant to be built in Kosovo. Both PMs highlighted the important role that the new Durres-Pristina road will play in deepening economic relations between the two countries. The warm reception and personal rapport between the two prime ministers put to rest allegations of chilly relations between the two that date back to the mid-90s' Kosovo conflict.

13. (U) President Topi awarded Thaci the Skanderbeg medal, one of Albania's highest honors, in recognition of his essential role in the struggle for freedom and independence in Kosovo. Topi also said that Kosovo would be able to successfully face the challenges that lay ahead, saying "I have no doubt that Albania and Kosovo will soon both be members of NATO." Thaci also met with Opposition leader Edi Rama, with whom he maintains a close and longstanding relationship. Thaci hailed Rama as "the future leader of Albania and a man of great changes in our region."

14. (U) Finally, Thaci traveled to Durres to attend a road naming ceremony and then to Vlora where he was awarded honorary citizenship by the Mayor. On the way to Vlora, Thaci and Prime Minister Berisha stopped in Kavaja to pay a visit to the family of an Albanian soldier who died during the war in Kosovo.

AN EMOTIONAL ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT

15. (U) Thaci delivered an emotional address to Parliament in full plenary session. He recalled the Kosovar people's struggle for freedom and expressed gratitude for the century-old support of the Albanian people and institutions. Interrupted several times by

applause, Thaci also highlighted his personal ties to Tirana, the city where he had lived for several years after the fall of communism. "Kosovo and Albania as two independent states have one goal and one vision: integration into NATO and the EU." Speaking of the U.S. support for the independence of Kosovo, Thaci said: "A year ago from this town, President Bush sent a clear message about the freedom and independence of Kosovo. In this hall of the Albanian democracy, I would like to thank the U.S., EU, and NATO for their support."

COMMENT

¶6. (U) While the visit reaffirmed that Kosovo's independence will mark a period of deepening relations with Albania, the two leaders once again dismissed press speculation of a Greater Albania, focusing instead on their mutual commitment to European and NATO integration. Berisha's press conference comments on the need to fight organized crime show that Tirana is sensitive to the international allegations of the presence of organized crime in Kosovo. Berisha's warm welcome for Thaci also put to rest long standing allegations of a strained relationship between the two leaders. Thaci's convivial meeting with Socialist leader Rama, however, and Thaci's ringing endorsement of Rama's future leadership confirmed that ties between the two remain strong.

WITHERS